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A SYSTEMS ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL BOARD ACTION.

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THE BASIC ASSUMPTION OF THE FUNCTIONAL-SYSTEMS THEORY IS THAT STRUCTURES FULFILL FUNCTIONS IN SYSTEMS AND THAT SUBSYSTEMS OPERATE SEPARATELY WITHIN ANY TYPE OF STRUCTURE. RELYING MAINLY ON GABRIEL ALMOND'S PARADIGM, THE AUTHOR ATTEMPTS TO DETERMINE THE USEFULNESS OF THE FUNCTIONAL-SYSTEMS THEORY IN CONDUCTING EMPIRICAL RESEARCH OF SCHOOL BOARDS. ALL SCHOOL BOARDS HAVE FOUR UNIVERSAL QUALITIES--EQUILIBRIUM, INTERDEPENDENCE, COMPREHENSIVENESS, AND BOUNDARY. DEMANDS AND SUPPORTS (INPUTS) REFLECTING THE WANTS AND DESIRES OF CONCERNED INDIVIDUALS ARE MADE TO THE SCHOOL BOARD. THE ACCEPTANCE OR REJECTION OF AN INPUT AT A SCHOOL BOARD MEETING IS DETERMINED BY COMMUNICATION. THE POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF RULE MAKING, APPLICATION, AND ADJUDICATION COMPLETE THE CONVERSION PROCESS, AND OUTPUTS (POLICY DETERMINATION) RESULT. BY USING CONTENT ANAYSIS TO TEST THE APPLICABILITY OF THE SYSTEMS APPROACH TO SCHOOL BOARD RESEARCH, THE AUTHOR FINDS THAT EXTRACTIVE DEMANDS ARE MORE PREVALENT, AND OUTPUT TOTALS CORRESPOND CLOSELY WITH INPUT TOTALS. ALTHOUGH SOME CONCEPTS ARE UNVERIFIED, THE FUNCTIONAL-SYSTEMS APPROACH SEEMS TO IMPROVE RESEARCHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE SCHOOL BOARD FUNCTION. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION (CHICAGO, FEBRUARY 17, 1966). (FF)

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A SYSTEMS ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL BOARD ACTION [1]

by

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What is functional-system theory? Where did it come from and who influenced it? In what direction is it most likely to grow? These questions cannot be answered completely within the approach that I will discuss in this paper, but neither can they be answered completely without examining the origins of this approach in the various fields of the social and physical sciences.[2] Functional-systems theory was first developed from basic assumptions set forth in the physical sciences. The social scientists later supplanted, supplemented, reduced and revised the original postulates in almost as many different ways as there have been contributions to this approach. The common assumption of all these endeavors appears to be that structures perform functions in systems and that systems tend to be self-regulating.

Some of the major criticisms of functional-systems theory can be summarized as (1) a lack of verification of theory, (2) the failure to operationalize concepts, and (3) the difficulties of applying an organismic approach to reality. Almond has suggested that though these criticisms are important, they should not obscure the original insights of those who have developed such concepts as equilibrium, interdependence, integration and functionality.[3]

The approach that I intend to delineate is simply an adaptation of the basic concepts developed in the social sciences with special emphasis upon a political science paradigm developed by Gabriel Almond for the analysis

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of political systems in developing areas. Specifically, the purpose of the study was (1) to develop a set of concepts for classifying events related to the performance of school boards, and (2) to ascertain the applicability of the functional-systems approach for future research in the field of educational administration. Thus, the study I present attempts to refine, adapt and create concepts in order to provide a useful research tool permitting empirical research of the activities of local public school boards.

Although Almond has gone further than most in clarifying this approach, it is still at this stage only rudimentary as a research device for studying political systems. However, this conceptual framework appeared to offer a way of examining local school boards and the kinds of relationships and activities associated with this governing body. With this in mind, then, the refinement and adaptation of the functional-systems approach, as discussed here, is in its present form extraordinarily crude. But as Willard Waller concluded in 1932 about his own work pertaining to functional-systems theory, "this sort of empirical research must be done before more refined investigations can proceed."[4]

THE CONCEPTUAL DIMENSION

In dealing with the concept of a political system, I have adopted Max Weber's definition that all political systems can be distinguished from other social systems because they alone comprise all that affects or threatens the use of legitimate force.[5] I make the assumption that this same thread can be found analytically woven through the public school system. Public school systems can, and do, within limits prescribed by law and varying from state to state, invoke the powers of the larger political system to enforce

their legitimate claims on resources and to enforce their rules.

The four generic properties of systems (equilibrium, interdependence, comprehensiveness and boundary) may be applied to the school system or school board as political subsystems.[6] The school board as a political subsystem displays an unequivocal collective identity plus a set of relationships established through interaction.[7] It is postulated that school board members comprise an interdependent unit and that when a change is made in one part such as replacing, adding or removing a member, the relationships between all other parts of the system will be affected. Moreover, when conflict arises because of external or internal pressures, the members of the system will tend to maintain equilibrium by pulling together to rebut chaos and confusion. The criterion of comprehensiveness of the system can be applied to the school board as a political subsystem by including all formal structures which include the branches of state government in their postures of concern for education, the state educational bureaucracy, as well as political parties, interest groups and the anomic phenomena of sit-ins, pickets and strikes. Finally, the boundary of the system is determined by who is a member and who is not. Thus, the school board system is comprised of official and ex-officio members who meet the statutory requirements for school board membership. Furthermore, only at a legally constituted meeting is a board member acting as part of a system.

The concepts I have selected from Almond's model may be subsumed under inputs, conversion functions and outputs.[8] While focusing upon various sub-classes, I will attempt to provide examples applicable to the school board system. It is necessary to make only brief reference to each concept due to the time allowed for this presentation.

The inputs are classified as demands and supports. There are four subclasses of demand inputs: extractive, regulative, symbolic and participative.

1. Extractive demands refer to statements made relative to increasing curriculum offerings, instructional materials, personnel services, school plant facilities and business or financial items.

2. Regulative demands are demands relative to governing the behavior of the members of the school board and the subordinate school system. Duty schedules, working hours, teaching assignments, student attendance, criteria for advancement and the like are examples of areas for which regulations might be demanded.

3. Symbolic demands are those demands which establish the basis for governmental action regarding special meetings, publications, tributes, and special programs. These are demands for public display.

4. Participative demands would include demands expressed by individuals, ethnic groups, regional groups and so forth to take part in the governmental functions of the board. Recall elections, petitions, changes from city-wide to precinct representation are a few examples of the indicators of participative demands. These demands would probably occur only during times of conflict and much less frequently than other classes of demand inputs.

The second kind of inputs are supports. These may be responsive to the outputs. They fall into three categories: materials, obedience and deference.

1. Material supports take the form of finances from taxes levied by local, state and federal governments; contributions, endowments or gifts donated by individuals, interest groups, or governments;

and personnel qualified to fill the various positions in the school system.

2. Obedience refers to the willingness of members of the school board system or the subordinate school system to conform to the rules and regulations established by the state government and the local board.

3. The support input of deference pertains to activities of persons inside or outside the school system honoring the school board's authority and the symbolic events provided by the authoritative acts of the school board.

Demands are processed into outputs as the school board performs political and governmental functions. The political functions are significant to the school system because they refer to the activities which initiate or process inputs into the school board system. The demands are articulated or aggregated by members of the school board.

1. Articulation refers to the activities of one or more individuals or the entire school board that lead to the discovery of a potential input and to subsequent presentation of this input during a legally constituted meeting.

2. Aggregation refers to the consolidation of two or more demands into a single policy proposal.

The communication function refers to the transmission of information regarding a demand or support during a discussion by the school board members at a legally constituted meeting. This function may serve as the basis for governmental actions but must precede or follow the actual statement of a demand or support. Moreover, communication is requisite to the processing of demands in a pattern of flow to the point at which a governmental action occurs, or at which the input is ignored or dissipates.

The governmental functions are classified as rule making, rule application and rule adjudication. These functions complete the conversion process.

1. Rule making is a statement of one or more decisions or policies based upon the adoption or rejection of one or more policy proposals. When the board uses implied or discretionary authority to accomplish immediate goals, it is rule making.

2. Rule application is a statement applying local rules or state laws to one or more policy proposals. Because the school board exists almost entirely within the authority of the state, they apply the rules made by the state in a majority of instances where they act upon policy proposals.

3. Rule adjudication is a statement of one or more decisions or policies subsequent to the acknowledgement of opposing or contrasting policy proposals. Whenever they act as a judiciary body and make formal decisions based on an opinion about conflicting or contrasting demands, they are performing an act of rule adjudication.

The outputs of a system are classified as extractions, regulations, symbols and allocations or distributions. These classifications correspond to the different kinds of inputs mentioned earlier. Outputs are the consequences of the governmental actions and are responsive to the demand inputs.[9] Thus, a demand is processed or converted into an output which may or may not generate support from the environing society.

THE EMPIRICAL DIMENSION

After working definitions were established for each of the aforementioned concepts, the applicability of this approach was ascertained through a content analysis of the transcripts of six board meetings. The

meetings were chosen arbitrarily on the basis of the range of issues presented and discussed by board members such as construction, curriculum, the opening of school and the budget. The working definitions were used to classify the action or theme of each sentence appearing in the transcripts. Two major limitations were seen in the use of content analysis for this exploratory work. First, certain concepts such as obedience, deference and participation require a measuring device other than a content analysis technique to produce data for analysis. Second, an interview schedule was not used to supplement the coding device, but should be incorporated in the future for validating data found in the documentary sources and for probing answers to questions raised from those aspects of the conceptual framework unverified in written records. At this point, I would like to summarize a few of the findings gained through this preliminary test of the framework to determine its utility for future investigations.

On the input side there were more extractive demands than demands related to specific rules and regulations or to special meetings, programs and other publicity ventures. On the output side, the totals for each kind and the overall total of outputs vary slightly from the demand inputs. This differential can be explained by a few demands that were tabled or ignored, thus, failing to survive the conversion process. Finally, only two classes of supports were represented in the data. Because of a surplus of data connoting admiration, praise, and appreciation, a new category, <u>evaluative supports</u>, was added to the framework. No attempt was made to measure the intensity of an input or its source. Hence, certain inputs that are converted into outputs undoubtedly have more significance than others.

The inputs portrayed in the abovementioned meetings were articulated (e.g., a member of the board acted as a linkage between the environment and

the system) or self-initiated (e.g., a member of the board initiated a demand at a meeting). It was questionable as to whether a few of these actions found in the written records were articulated or self-initiated. Moreover, rule application occurred at a ratio of approximately 6 to 1 over rule making. An act of rule adjudication did not appear in the data examined, but it might be that this function is performed in large part at special hearings or outside of a regular meeting. Finally, the communication function, or providing and requesting information regarding a specific demand, appeared to occupy most of the school board's time. Although subclassifications of communication were not established in this study, March and Simon's conceptualizations of communication for non-programmed activity: to initiate, establish and coordinate programs; to provide data for application of strategies required for execution of programs; to evoke programs; and to provide information on the results of activities would appear to be useful in refining the concept by establishing definitive subclasses for research purposes.[10]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The concepts and their properties presented in this study resulted in more refined and operational categories for future research into the performance of school boards. A few concepts were unverified in the sources of data used in this study. This implies that a different approach or technique is required for attempting to determine the utility of certain concepts for future research.

In regard to the applicability of the framework, it was found that the amount and kind of data found in the board minutes for the meetings under scrutiny varied considerably. In future studies, it was suggested that some

of the concepts be examined closely as to whether they might be more useful if subdivisions or different classes were formed within the large portions of data representing them. An example of this would be the concept of communication.

Hence, studies need to be conducted in several communities by several investigators or coders to determine the degree of consistency of the framework in producing comparable data for specific concepts. The concepts that remain after some additional exploratory study has been made of school boards in different communities should be valuable in studying administrative structures, similar to the school board, at all levels of the governmental structure of public education. Ultimately, I would hope that valuable insights, and indeed explanations and predictions, will be derived from examining the relationships between variations in performances of school boards in their posture as political and governmental mechanisms and the kinds of outputs and outcomes that are provided by them for school systems and the larger society.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Jay D. Scribner, "A Functional-Systems Analysis of School Board Performance" (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University School of Education, 1966).

[2]See Don Martindale, The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1960), Chapters 17-19, for a discussion of the theoretical orientation of sociological functionalism.

[3]Gabriel Almond, "The Developmental Approach to Political Systems," World Politics, Vol. 17, No. 2 (January 1965), pp. 186-189.

[4]Willard Waller, The Sociology of Teaching (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1932), p. 3.

[5]Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" in Gerth and Mills, From Max Weber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 77-128.

[6]Gabriel Almond and James S. Coleman (eds.), The Politics of the Developing Areas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 7-9.

[7]Theodore Caplow, Principles of Organization (Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1964), Chapter I.

[8]Almond and Coleman, op. cit.

[9] Factual referents of each of the concepts in the framework were derived from letters to the board, board minutes and transcripts. These are shown in the author's dissertation.

[10]James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, Organizations (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1958), p. 161.